

8 Source-based questions

A note to readers. It is suggested that you increase magnification to 125% or 150% to read the guide on screen. Click on the magnifying glass icon at bottom left of the screen and select your magnification.

————— Key points in Chapter 8 —————

- Source-based questions require the incremental development of defined skills.
- They include an appreciation of context, comprehension, source evaluation and ability to come to a reasoned conclusion.
- Good background knowledge is needed.
- Class practice will develop and refine the defined skills.

Overview by Neil Hart

IN PREPARING FOR SOURCE-BASED QUESTIONS students should first be aware of the collections of material available for their subject. On the whole, at A Level, source-based questions are connected with relatively short chronological periods - with Special Subjects or Depth Studies. Nevertheless, the array of relevant documents available can appear daunting, even though what is readily to hand in published form represents only a small proportion of extant material. Source material can never be separated from secondary work; indeed, the line between primary and secondary sources is often very fine. Professional historians use a much wider selection of documents than is available to students, and access to this greater range can therefore be gained at second hand. The work of historians is frequently indispensable in pointing out the limitations of the sources or in reinterpreting the evidence the student will be using. The work of Ralph Griffiths on the evidence (based on pardon lists) for the composition of Cade's rebel host in 1450 provides a striking example. The lists contain the names of a surprisingly large number of gentlemen

and others of relatively high social rank. This has led to the conclusion that the rebel army was far from being an irresponsible peasant mob. On closer examination, however, among the names are those of officials against whom the rebels were complaining and those who helped suppress the rebellion. This would lead to the rather different conclusion that not all on the lists were active rebels, but that many individuals had taken advantage of a royal pardon to avoid future prosecution for actions before and during the rebellion, including its suppression. (R.A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, pp 619-623.)

Preparation may well be easier where examination boards provide collections of prescribed texts, with the assurance that the questions on examination papers will be based on these texts alone. It is even more helpful when there is a close identification of a section of the texts with a section of a paper. Other boards, whilst not prescribing texts, recommend collections of printed documents. Here, the students' task may be a little more difficult but, with the necessary guidance, students can familiarise themselves with the texts which are likely to be put before them. It should be obvious that, for any special subject or depth study, certain documents are central and essential. The English Reformation of the 1530s could hardly be studied without reference to the Act in Restraint of Appeals or the Act of Supremacy. Similarly, the Nuremberg Laws are central to the understanding of Nazi anti-Semitism.

A hierarchy of skills

Needless to say, the techniques of handling source material should be tackled regularly in class, as well as by use of and familiarisation with past papers and trial examinations. Although there is a broadly similar policy towards sources on the part of the various examination boards, there are differences of style. Students should be aware of the approaches and question type offered by their particular board. However, virtually all provide a clutch of source material, amounting to a total maximum of about 600, with sub-questions carrying varying weight of marks.

There is a hierarchy of skills in handling source material. At a lower level of difficulty, although vitally important, is comprehension. The passages need to be understood, particularly the key ideas, phrases and words. Language changes, and there are particular problems in the less modern periods.

Comprehending and comparing

'Dearth', for example, now commonly held to mean 'shortage' was, in the sixteenth century, generally understood to mean 'deariness'. In

studying a text such as the Discourse of the Common Weal, dealing as it does with Tudor inflation and other economic problems, a close understanding of language is essential. Besides being expected to have a general understanding of the passages, students are often required to explain words and phrases or to identify a particular event or personality. Here, although a brief definition may be possible, students should attempt to add further explanation or information relevant to the context in which the word, phrase, event or personality occurs. At the same time, over-lengthy answers should be avoided and, as for other responses, be in proportion to the number of marks allocated for the sub-question.

Within the overall assessment objective of testing the ability of students to use and evaluate source material, questions generally include the requirement to compare two or more sources. Students should ask themselves a series of questions as a way of formulating a response. Do the sources contradict each other? If so, how far and in what ways? Does one add to the impression gained from another? How far do the sources corroborate each other? This last is a vital question since the whole exercise of forming historical judgements is based upon how far one piece of evidence bears out another. One of the great problems of judging the value of the Hossbach Memorandum in the context of Hitler's war and foreign policy has been the lack or paucity of corroboration. On a slightly different but related issue, the student might well come across a document with internal inconsistencies. These should certainly be pointed out as the occasion arises.

Context

Students should be aware of the context of the sources with which they are presented. Sometimes this appreciation is tested directly. On a straightforward level, students should know, without necessarily having to state them, the circumstances surrounding a particular passage, what happened before and how events unfolded afterwards. In a rather higher range, there should be an awareness of how the document relates more widely to the period or subject as a whole. Such an awareness leads to informed judgements about the significance of the material.

All sources have their limitations. These arise out of such considerations as authorship, bias, misinformation and ignorance, gaps and lack of corroboration. Students need to subject sources to careful and sober evaluation. What are the limitations of a source, how reliable is it, how useful, how significant? An understanding of provenance, or derivation, of a source is essential and the matter of authorship particularly

vital. What is known about the writer? How objective or partial is he, does he have an axe to grind? What is the purpose of the document, why was it written, is it deliberately propagandist or perhaps unconsciously partial? Is it a government or official source? The question of whether the author is foreign or native can be important. A very valuable source for the history of late fifteenth-century England is the Italian Dominic Mancini's *Usurpation of Richard III*. It might be argued that as a foreigner he is objective and dispassionate about the controversial matters he is describing. On the other hand, how far did he understand the English political scene and how wide were his sources of information? Foreign ambassadors can be invaluable; their reports are often full and regular. However, they were sometimes in a rather embattled, even isolated, position and their dispatches to their masters can reflect this. The letters of the Imperial ambassador, Simon Renard, are an important source for the reign of Mary Tudor. He was close to the centre of events and to the Queen herself, although he is not necessarily a reliable witness. At times he was unduly alarmist about the state of affairs in England, and was critical of the English Council in order to exaggerate his own influence and importance.

Chronological position and tone

As well as authorship, students should take particular notice of dating which, where known, is almost always supplied. An obvious consideration is the chronological proximity of an account to the events it describes. A distinction always needs to be made between the date of the event and the date of the account. Eye-witness or near contemporary accounts have their value but can lack perspective and objectivity. The level of involvement can be too great. Careful note should also be taken of the chronological relationship of the sources in a collection to each other. This can be illuminating in dealing with a highly volatile and crowded period such as the French Revolution. The events of the summer of 1789 or of 1793 fall thick and fast in a state of whirling change.

A sensitivity to tone and language is essential, and direct questions are sometimes asked about such matters. Is the language extravagant or is it sober and moderate? What words are chosen? Are opponents or other views being condemned rather too vigorously? The language of antagonists in the sixteenth-century European Reformation or of the opponents of Catholicism at the time of the Popish Plot in later seventeenth-century England provide particularly rich examples. The condemnation of the Girondins by their Montagnard rivals during the French Revolution provide excellent examples of bitter political invective. Whilst being aware

of tone and language, students should also ask whether an author is attempting to make judgements or is simply describing events.

Sources and the making of judgements

Possibly the most difficult skill, and one which is generally highly rewarded, is the ability to bring a whole clutch of documents together and to form an overview. Questions which require this skill generally identify a theme and ask whether or how the sources provide convincing evidence for making judgements or drawing conclusions about it. The approach needs to go beyond paraphrasing along the lines of 'document A says ... and document B shows ... whilst document C describes ...'. Some comprehension skills are required and a certain amount of paraphrasing is probably inevitable, but the theme, or themes, running through the passages, together with related issues and problems, need to be very clearly identified. Then it must be shown how each document handles or bears upon such themes, issues and problems. The approach must be analytical and critical, the value and limitations of the sources need to be assessed and evaluated. Finally, there might be an opportunity for extrapolation. Does the material allow further conclusions to be reached? How far can valid historical judgements be made and what is the scope for personal interpretation?

This part of Source-based questions was contributed by Neil Hart, latterly Headmaster of Watford Grammar School and currently an AS/A History Chief Examiner. His comments were first published in The Good History Students' Handbook (published by Sempringham).

Sources' study and a worked example

ADVANCED HISTORY STUDENTS are assessed on their skill in understanding and interpreting documents. Some students believe document questions are easier than essays and structured questions - but they are wrong. Document questions probably test more skills. What do document questions test?

What documentary questions assess

1 Background knowledge

In order to comprehend a historical document, you need to understand its context. You need to know the rest of the story. You would not be able to comment effectively upon a single speech from a Shakespearean play unless you knew the rest of the play. Similarly,

you could not understand or comment upon the words of Martin Luther King unless you knew all about race relations in mid-twentieth century America. Indeed, you would struggle if you did not know the history of American race relations in the previous century. Document work therefore assesses your background knowledge of the topic, without which you cannot make sense of any contemporary source.

2 Comprehension and exposition skills

In some ways, questions on historical documents are rather like English comprehension and literary appreciation questions. For example, you could be asked about the language and tone of a source for both History and English in the sixth form. You have to be able to understand what the author of a historical document is trying to say. Thus, document work assesses your comprehension skills. Obviously, when you are set questions on documents, you need to be able to answer those questions clearly, so the questions also test your exposition skills.

3 Evaluative skills

Once you understand the language and the context of the document, you are well placed to discuss whether or not it is useful and/or reliable. Most of the time, documents cannot be taken at 'face value'. What people say is rarely objectively factual, because the person's background, knowledge and individual prejudices and preoccupations usually determine it. The examiner could ask you, 'Is Source X useful and/or reliable for the historian who wants to know/understand...' about something specific. Document work thus assesses your skills of evaluation.

4 Ability to make inferences

Sometimes you have to 'read between the lines' of a document. For example, when a writer omits to mention something important, it could be a sign that he does not realise that it is important. When you 'tease out' what a document is saying by implication, your ability to make inferences is being tested.

5 Ability to come to a reasoned conclusion

One of the most important areas upon which you will be tested is your

skill in drawing conclusions from a variety of documents, combined with background knowledge. This is the process that most historians go through when they are writing a book. You will be demonstrating the historian's skills, but on a far smaller scale!

Summary: What documentary questions assess

Thus, document questions test many skills within a context of detailed knowledge. Those skills are sometimes tested in relation to one document alone. On other occasions you will be referred to several documents on the same topic. You might then be asked whether the documents agree, disagree or, more likely, both agree and disagree. Your skills of comprehension and evaluation, and your background knowledge, will help you to spot differences and similarities in documents. Thus, you will be tested on a combination of skills relating to comprehension, inference, evaluation, comparison, and, coming to a reasoned conclusion. Those skills can only be effectively demonstrated if you have detailed background knowledge and exposition skills.

Examples to illustrate the points made

The documents used. The documents relate to race relations in nineteenth-century America. In the fifteenth century, North America was inhabited by Native Americans (Indians). In the seventeenth century, White Europeans settled in North America. Whites took the Indians' lands and, also, imported Black slaves. Whites had thus created a racially tense society.

Document A

Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people, a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government very similar in their manners and customs.

(John Jay, writing in the 1790s. Jay was one of the Founding Fathers of the new nation, the United States of America.)

Document B

Treaties were expedients by which ignorant intractable and savage people were induced without bloodshed to yield up what civilised people had a right to possess.

(Written by governor of Georgia, writing in the mid-nineteenth century.)

Document C

The idea that a handful of wild, half naked, thieving, plundering, murdering savages should be dignified with the sovereign attributes of nations, enter into solemn treaties, and claim a country 500 miles wide by 1,000 miles long as theirs ... because they hunted buffalo and antelope over it ... is unsuited to the intelligence and justice of this age, or the natural rights of mankind.

(Written by an American government official, writing in the nineteenth century.)

Document D

We all wore White man's clothes and ate White man's food and went to White man's churches and spoke White man's talk. And so after a while we also began to say Indians were bad. We laughed at our own people and their blankets and cooking pots and sacred societies and dances.

(Sun Elk, a Pueblo Indian, remembering his education in a White man's boarding school.)

What you should do before answering questions on documents

1. Make sure you know the topic — without background knowledge, you will struggle.
2. Read the document, and pay particular attention to the provenance (that is, the information you are given about the speaker/writer, the date and the audience).

Answering questions that test background knowledge

Questions that test background knowledge alone are only worth a few marks. It is advisable to write just one or two sentences, with a few names and dates.

For example: Question. *What does John Jay mean by 'a people descended from the same ancestors' (Document A)?*

Answer. John Jay refers to the Americans of British ancestry who had settled on the eastern coast of America from the seventeenth century onwards. Most of the Founding Fathers of the new United States in the late eighteenth century were, like John Jay, descended from those British settlers.

Note: while some questions ask only for background knowledge, other questions require you to use background knowledge in order to demonstrate some historical skill. All the following questions would be impossible to answer without knowing a great deal about the topic, and without incorporating some of that knowledge in the answer.

Answering questions that test your comprehension skills

One thing that makes it difficult to understand documents is that the author is often trying to persuade an audience about something. Always look out for emotive language, especially adjectives, that 'make a case'. Point out and quote the emotive language when asked to discuss language and tone.

For example: Question. *What is the aim of the government official in Document C? How effectively does he use language and tone?*

Answer. When the official uses emotive language to denigrate the 'wild' and 'murdering savages', he is clearly trying to justify the White American take-over of Indian land. He implies that Indians lack 'intelligence' and it is therefore 'unjust' and against natural law for them to have the land. The official uses a hostile and authoritative tone, derogatory adjectives, and legalistic language, in order to justify White theft! This was an effective use of language for an audience of land hungry White people who thought they were the superior race.

Answering questions that test your skills of evaluation

When you are asked if documents are 'useful' or 'reliable', you will usually find that there are valid points to be made for both 'yes' and 'no' answers. You should make points for and against, even if you think one side is markedly weaker than the other. With the following question, for example, it is quite difficult to deny that the sources are reliable.

Question. *How reliable are documents B, C and D, for historians studying White attitudes to Native Americans in the nineteenth century?*

Answer. The White government officials seem to despise the 'ignorant' Indians as 'murdering savages'. They dismiss treaties guaranteeing Indian landownership as worthless. The documents thus suggest a contemptuous attitude towards Indians and their culture. This is confirmed by Sun Elk, who began to act like a White man and

consequently said, 'Indians were bad'. Documents B and C are reliable reminders of White attitudes. Nineteenth-century Whites certainly considered themselves 'civilised' and superior to Indians. Their contemptuous attitude is proved by their disregard for treaties, as when Whites moved back into the Black Hills of Dakota in search of gold in the 1870s. However, it is just possible that the documents are neither fully accurate nor fully representative of White attitudes. Indian boys, like Sun Elk, were certainly put into White boarding schools to 'civilise' them but it is just possible that Sun Elk is exaggerating the cultural hostility of Whites as he looks back with resentment at having been taken from his parents and put into an alien environment. Similarly, the White officials might be exaggerating the savagery of the Indians in order to justify White theft of Indian land. Thus, the White attitude to Indian culture might not be quite as hostile as taking the documents on face value would suggest. On the other hand, we know the White American treatment of the Indians was usually appalling (as at massacres such as Wounded Knee). Therefore, it seems certain, that these documents accurately reflect the hostile and patronising attitude characteristic of most Whites in nineteenth-century America.

Answering questions that test your ability to make inferences

Sometimes you can learn more from what a document does not say than from what it does say.

For example: Question. *What can you infer about John Jay's views (Document A) on the non-White races?*

Answer. John Jay rhapsodises about this country given by God to White Americans - with no mention of the original Native American inhabitants, nor the slaves imported from Africa. Thus, we can infer that he is totally dismissive of non-White races and their rights and customs.

Answering questions that test your ability to use sources and background knowledge to come to a conclusion about a historical issue

Sometimes you will be asked about a historical debate, or given a quotation and asked whether or not you agree with it. You will be told to answer with reference to documents and your background knowledge. Such mini-essays require you to come to a conclusion about a historical issue. For example, you might be asked what you could con-

clude about nineteenth-century American race relations using these documents and your background knowledge. Although you could go through points from the documents first, and then give some evidence of extra background knowledge, it is far better to combine the two together. Thus, while using Source A as documentary evidence of White supremacist feeling, you could use John Jay as a trigger to lead you to recall and demonstrate your knowledge of how the American Constitution allowed the continuation of slavery and treated the Indians as a 'foreign nation'. Thus, your background knowledge confirms White arrogance and racial hostility.

Conclusion

Documents can be difficult, but you can make them easier for yourself by:

- (a) Learning the topic thoroughly.
- (b) Reading lots of contemporary sources in order to get a 'feel' for the language and the sentiments of the period.
- (c) Practising whenever possible.

This part of Source-based questions, first published in new perspective, was contributed by Viv Sanders who is Head of History at Dame Alice Harpur School, Bedford, and the author of USA and Vietnam 1945-75, 1998, and Race Relations in the USA, 2000, both in the Hodder & Stoughton - Access to History series.